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ABSTRACT

A report of the Committee on Rhetorical Criticism, presented at the Pheasant Run Conference of the Developmental Project on Rhetoric, May 14, 1969, is discussed. Some specific recommendations made by the committee with regard to critical practice and pedagogy are given. (DB)

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A MODERN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Anyone who has gone to the trouble in the last few years to examine the tasks and problems faced by contemporary rhetorical critics might well recall a pithy Biblical phrase of ambiguity to characterize what he sees: "It is the best of times -- it is the worst of times." The difficulties of attempting to understand, account for and appraise the multitude and variety of messages which constitute our contemporary rhetorical environment can appear to be overwhelming. The knowledge explosion continues unabated, and even after the grain is sifted from the enormous quantity of chaff that appears in published form, we recognize that the new insights into human behavior we are gaining are not standing still for traditional categories we have used to systematize our cognitions. And permeating all of our perceptions is a mood of anxiety created by the tensions, polarizations, and confrontations of opinion in our society which seem to demand instant understanding and accomodation. So, as the rhetorical critic is propelled, by curiosity and a desire to contribute something to the human condition, toward the plethora of complicated rhetorical transactions facing him, he understandably experiences moments of what Alvin Toffler calls, "future shock."

The other side of the proverbial coin is as exhilerating as the former was unsettling. As far as the recent history of rhetorical study is concerned, we have traversed the ground of rediscovering classical texts, and while some of the insights and concepts of classical scholars will remain viable, we are clearly in a new time of theoretical questioning. The scholarly endeavors of Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Sapir, Ogden&Anger, I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke, to mention only a few, have taken us across the threshold into the study of man as a symbol inventor and user. The fruits of this perspective have yet to be fully developed in rhetorical study, but the promise

is manifest. Our era is, in a sense, a pioneering one, requiring new approaches, explorations, hypothesis, and methodologies. And of course, new modes and channels and forms of communication which demand attention in our time lead to a questioning of old concepts and force the development of new ones. So the contemporary rhetorical critic is in the process of freeing himself from some of the constraints and limitations which previously guided his work, and is undertaking the stimulating quest for new discovery.

All of these elements of ambiguous promise informed the thoughts, feelings and efforts of the committee which gathered at Pheasant Run last spring to suggest new directions for rhetorical criticism. What I should like to do, in the time that I have, is develop in more detail some of the major considerations of that committee, including ideas presented in original papers at the Wingspread conference which preceded and influenced the Pheasant Run sessions. I shall rely upon the committees' final report to reveal the refinement of those considerations and ideas, then turn briefly to some of the specific committee recommendations.

One of the pervasive characteristics of our contemporary rhetorical environment is the influence and impact of mass media, particularly television. We are forced to admit the cogency of Mc Luhan's observation that we have experienced an electronic implosion which heightened our sense of political and social awareness.[1] Just as electricity effected a new environment, by providing revolutionary sources of light and power, (someone remarked that we humans conduct our lives according to the location of electrical outlets) so television has, by its ubiquitous nature, created a new environment, heaping the problems of the world on the doorstep of the average person. We are not yet sure of the exact nature of television impact, but we certainly know that all contemporary rhetorical transactions are constrained by the television environment.

We are bombarded by more messages of different kinds than any previous age. In a world of numerous messages, competition for attention is keen. The rapid change of message form and content becomes pronounced as advertisers, newsmen and others search for ways to hold audiences. We are living in a nonlinear world, where our message environment can be likened to a kind of mosaic with bits and pieces of messages arriving at various times and in a variety of situations and contexts. It is up to the auditor to put it together, and order and make sense of it. There is a strange unreality to the phenomenological world bound by a 21 inch screen, where events of complex origin, such as the war in Indo-China are dealt with in a thirty-minute documentary, or a 30 second interview on the Capitol steps, and where the tragic assassination of a President can be turned into a four-day spectacle of national grief. As rhetorical critics we need to know more about the psychological impact of this electronic environment, because it affects message production and reception.

To focus a bit more specifically on our environment, manifestations of polarization and protest are demanding the attention of rhetorical critics. The apparent despair with, and disregard for a rhetoric of problem discussion and solution based on "reason, civility and decorum," has led to physical demonstration and confrontation; and the kind of behavior labelled "body rhetoric."[2] Now, in addition to dealing with full blown argumentative statements or appeals, the rhetorical critic is faced with the prospect either of ignoring, or accounting for the upraised clenched fist, a proliferation of buttons and bumper stickers ranging from "Make Love, Not War" to "Have You Thanked a Green Plant Today", slogans like "All Power to the People" and such rhetorically motivated actions as love-ins, be-ins, sit-ins, and "trashings." Traditional neo-Aristotelian concepts of "ethos", "pathos" and "logos"

somehow seem out of place and inadequate when dealing with these new rhetorical transactions.

One realization that comes from looking at our contemporary rhetorical scene is that past ways of conceptualizing the rhetorical transaction have been too simplistic. Much of our theory and methodology presupposes platform speaking, wherein a rhetor addresses an audience with a view toward achieving a particular and immediate effect. This emphasis on discreteness fails to account for a number of presentational and transactional possibilities and discourages the expansion and development of critical theory and methodology. In this day and age, it makes little sense to think that we have accounted for very much when we have described the impact of a single message, delivered in a single setting, to a single audience. Our contemporary rhetorical paradigm differs considerably from the source - message - audience - situation model. Rather, we need to picture it as a kind of continuous multi-media show, with multiple sources, a variety of messages, some related and some unrelated, a variety of situations and contexts in which they are received, some preplanned and others occurring by accident, and a potentially large number of audiences some of whom will be seeking certain kinds of messages, others having messages forced upon them or straying unintentionally into the paths of messages.

Awareness of the complexity of the rhetorical environment should lead us to more sophisticated descriptions of rhetorical transactions. We need to develop analytical perspectives which move beyond the rather simple stimulus-response model, or the elementary feed-back model. We must recognize that there are a number of relationships possible between a rhetor and his audience, and several of them may be in existence simultaneously. We must keep in mind that people do not react to separate parts of a message, but to the whole in a unitary perceptual fashion, and the reaction to a message is

formed from a larger psychological environment containing innumerable response variables. As critics, we must attempt to determine the actual and potential effects that can occur when certain stimuli are presented in certain conditions. We must recognize that there are a number of potential audiences possible in most rhetorical transactions, and that one of the functions rhetoric can perform is that of creating audiences where previously none existed. In fact, the presence of mass media highlights the possibilities of creating audiences through rhetoric. It seems to me when we speak of the "radicalization of moderate students," for example, we choose a dramatic example of this creation phenomenon at work, and the relationships between Richard Nixon and his so-called "silent majority" would be an interesting one for rhetorical critics to study from this standpoint. We are aware of the fact that the descriptions of human reasoning and logic which we have used as touchstones for analysis are inadequate and misleading, and we must re-examine the traditional distinction between the rational and the non-rational elements of perception, attitude and belief. We must, in short, attempt to account for the ever changing, variform dynamics of human rhetorical transactions in a more penetrating and holistic way than we have previously done.

We are faced with the need to re-examine our traditional frame of reference which assumes that one characteristic of the rhetorical act is that it be somehow reasonable and cooperative. Standard textbooks are based on the idea that efficient, consistent arguments and appeals studded with supporting data will somehow enable adversaries to accommodate differences of opinion and attitude, in other words to reach a workable compromise. It is even possible, this view holds, that advocates representing one particular argumentative position will somehow win all by proving their position to be

the correct one -- assuming, of course, those opposing the point of view are reasonable. If disagreement leads to name-calling, or a punch in the mouth, or war, then obviously irrationality has entered the picture, and rhetoric retires through the back door. Such a notion, of course, fits our larger image of the cooperative nature of a democratic society. However, the intensity of the polarizations which have arisen in our society in recent years, and the various argumentative styles which spring from the varieties of points of view indicate that what we have labelled "rational discussion" in the past may not always be possible in all situations. We are in disagreement not only about means, but also about ends -- surely the polemic that we have witnessed over the role of the family, sex, the nature of higher education, women's suppression, and America's role in the world demonstrate the point. Disagreement about ends is not always comfortably dealt with, because it often indicates that two or more perceptual worlds are at stake -- human selves become identified with perceptual worlds, and one does not forsake his perceptual world easily and without struggle.

All of this means that conflict plays a prominent role in our affairs -- and rhetorical theory and criticism, as well as democracy itself, must accommodate conflict. As Hugh Duncan pointed out in his Wingspread paper, "Models of communication in society which are based on what occurs in communication <u>after</u> conflict is resolved must be used with great caution. If we assume that only moments of 'equilibrium' are moments of order, and that such moments are normal, we reduce conflict -- to what we call social disorganization." But how do we know, says Duncan, that men always want to agree? Competition is fun, winning is fun, conflict may be more enjoyable than harmoney. The game, as well as the victory sustains play.[2] And we might add, the rhetoric that occurs in moments of conflict will not always be neat and

orderly. To account for the rhetoric of conflict, the rhetorical scholar will need to broaden his scope of inquiry and his analytical methodology more than he ever has in the past.

All of this led the committee to acknowledge that rhetorical critics must extend the range of their enquiry to examine the full spectrum of human transactional possibilities. Music, for example, has not often been studied for its rhetorical impact. Yet, music has always fulfilled a significant rhetorical function in black culture, and the contemporary youth culture relies upon music for the achievement and sustenance of identification and reinforcement . Today's music is literally filled with rhetorical messages, both at the verbal and rhythmic levels. What are the rhetorical functions of dance? of clothing? of interpersonal behavior and group behavior? The rhetorical critic must have the freedom to pursue the particular aspect of human behavior he is interested in wherever he finds it, and in whatever settings it occurs, from rock and roll to put ons, to architecture and public forums, to ballet and international politics.

Now this may lead one to ask how the identity of a rhetorical critic is to be determined? The answer, provided by the committee on criticism at Pheasant Run is specific on the point. The rhetorical critic is identifiable by the nature of his inquiry. "Rhetorical criticism is to be identified by the kinds of questions posed by the critic. This position involves a shift in traditional emphases from identifying rhetorical criticism by material studied to identifying it by the nature of the critic's inquiry. We shall no longer assume that the subject of rhetorical criticism is only discourse or that any critic studying discourse is *ipso facto* a rhetorical critic. The critic becomes rhetorical to the extent that he studies his subject in terms of its actual and potential suasory effects. So identified, rhetorical

criticism may be applied to any human act, process, product or artifact which, in the critics' view, may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes or behavior. In describing the critics conception of his subject," the committee prefers the term 'suasion' to persuasion, because the latter term has certain limiting connotations of conscious manipulative intent on the part of a participator, and because it wishes to emphasize that the critics' identity is determined less by materials and methods than by the questions he asks concerning effects."[3]

Let me try to be clear about the nature and intent of this statement. It decries the notion that rhetoric is concern d with a proper "field" of study; the rhetorical critic is not to be bounded either by a particular kind of communication product or message or setting, nor is he to be restricted by any peculiar set of methodologies. Rather, recognizing that man is uniquely a symbolic being, the rhetorical critic focuses on symbolic transactions with an eye toward studying the actual or potential suasory effects of the symbols involved in the transaction. The critic's focus is unique. But he may study symbolic transactions wherever he finds them and may use whatever analytical techniques and points of view are necessary to answer his question concerning suasory effects.

The committee was asked to designate priorities for rhetorical criticism. We believe it is fundamentally important that rhetorical criticism should (1) contribute to rhetorical theory, or (2) illumine contemporary rhetorical transactions. The reasons for emphasizing study of the contemporary scene are obvious; we are faced with a number of communication crises demanding a major share of the time and energy of many people. If certain forms of communication can contribute to the productive management of conflict, we are ethically bound to discover and recommend them. To the extent that some forms

of communication unnecessarily increase tension, we are obligated to expose them. We believe the perspective enjoyed by those studying discourse of the past may be more than outweighed by the contemporary scholars access to materials, and awareness of the distinctive nuances of contemporary culture.

The critic's contributions to theory may assume a variety of forms. He may demonstrate that a particular theoretical principle is or is not applicable to a given set of conditions. He may show that certain concepts are necessary for the understanding of a particular phenomenon. He may clarify some distinctions, and show the ambiguity of others. He may delineate relationships among communication variables not previously considered, and discuss similarities or dissimilarities among events where it was previously thought none existed. Most importantly, he can help describe the conceptual possibilities of human symbolic transactions.

The committee did not presume to recommend specific methodologies, believing that any one of a number of methodologies might prove valuable depending upon the nature of the critical questions raised and the specific rhetorical situation to be examined. In general, however, the terms "critic-scientist" and "critic-artist," seemed to the committee to indicate two poles between which could be located a variety of methodological possibilities. At one extreme, the critic functions much as a scientist would, "deriving hypothesis from systematized constructs, controlling extraneous variables, minimizing error variance, operationalizing terms, arriving at low-order inferences about classes of events with a minimum of experimenter bias." At the other extreme, the critic operates artistically, "immersing himself in the particulars of his object of study, searching for the distinctive, illumining with metaphor the rhetorical transaction."[4]

The two poles are not as far apart as it might seem. The scientist proceeds methodically, but not objectively. His theories are often based on metaphors, his hypothesis are likely to be undersupported by rules, his operational definitions will not often reflect his constructs completely, and his interpretations, if useful, will probably go beyond his specific data. At the other end of the pole, the "critic-artist" operates as a rhetor himself, who takes his own audience into account as he phrases his insights, analyses and judgments in a manner which orders or reorders the rhetorical event. If we may risk an imperfect metaphor, the "critic-artist" may be thought of as a prism, "filtering, defining and analyzing the light shed by a rhetorical event." The prism, as well as the light, is an object of interest. Unlike the prism, however, the critic is not inanimate. The critic is human, and his choice and judgments will inevitably be inherent in his work. His values will be reflected in what he does, and his analysis can be considered an argument in its own right.

The committee believes it is often possible and desirable to join the roles of "critic-scientist" and "critic-artist." As the committee report states: "An exclusively scientific approach belies the richness of the rhetorical situation; an exclusively artistic approach prohibits abstracting from the particulars to some larger class of events or processes. The scientific and artistic function in complementary fashion when the critic both immerses himself in particulars and at the same time stands, psychologically, at a distance from them. On the one hand, he acts emphatically as a pseudo-participant in the rhetorical event; on the other hand, he acts dispassionately so as to transcend the event. Theory is made richer by the critics' involvement in the events he studies; theory is made clearer by his transcendence of those events."[5]

The committee did make some specific recommendations with regard to critical practice and pedagogy:

1. We should encourage both intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary team research, in order to provide a more complete accounting of rhetorical transactions.
2. In line with the above recommendation, we should encourage academic departments to develop procedures permitting two or more graduate students to undertake a common research project leading to the publication of separate dissertations or a co-authored dissertation.
3. We should encourage field studies where individuals or teams of scholars move into an area to gather data and undertake analyses of rhetorical transactions.
4. Academic associations should encourage, and if possible, provide for the gathering of small groups of speech analysts who are working on similar projects for the exchange of points of view and findings.
5. Academic associations should establish repositories for the collection of contemporary raw data, such as video-tapes and tape recordings of contemporary speeches, publications of such groups as the Black Panthers, the John Birch Society, Anti-War protest groups, etc.
6. Finally, and importantly, as rhetorical critics, we should examine the rhetoric of such areas of study as sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology, English, history, education, speech, etc. The assumptions of each discipline guide and constrain the nature and direction of the discipline's scholarship, and hence bear constant attention.

FOOTNOTES

1. Marshall McLuhan , Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, (New York, 1965), 5.

2. Hugh Dalziel Duncan, "The Need for Clarification In Social Models of Rhetoric," paper presented at the Wingspread conference of the Developmental Project on Rhetoric.

3. Report of the Committee on Rhetorical Criticism, presented at the Pheasant Run Conference of the Developmental Project on Rhetoric, May 14, 1969.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.